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Terrible-Tempered Komer, The Vietnam Pacifier, Converts His Critics

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Chicago Daily News Service

SAIGON — Six months ago the U.S. civilian and military missions here greeted with an almost unanimous groan of dismay and anger the news that Robert W. Komer was coming out to Vietnam.

A fresh battalion of Viet Cong could not have got a much colder reception than Komer, a native of Chicago, Harvard graduate and longtime Central Intelligence Agency specialist who for a year had served in the White House as President Johnson's special assistant on pacification in Vietnam.

Komer, the word went, was abrasive, snarling, superficial, a monster to work for who more than deserved his nickname as the "Blowtorch," and a shameless name-dropper.

Worst of all, they said, he was a wildly unrealistic optimist who had no understanding of the problems in Vietnam.

As if to prove his critics right, Komer arrived at the Saigon airport wearing a pair of rose-tinted sunglasses.

He still wears the glasses. And no one is ever likely to mistake him for a Dale Carnegie graduate.

He Makes 'Believers' of Them

But things have changed. Komer today has converted a lot of his critics, some of whom were threatening to resign rather than work for him.

He has, more and more people are now willing to concede, done an admirable job of getting the pacification program moving—and moving on a recognizable and coordinated course.

Komer, 45, came from Washington as part of the new U.S. Embassy team headed by Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker.

When Bunker switched pacification from civilian control and put it under the command of Gen. William C. Westmoreland, he appointed Komer—who holds the rank of ambassador—as Westmoreland's deputy for pacification.

Instantly the Komer critics waited for the explosion they were sure would come first time Komer turned his aggressive personality loose on the imperious four-star general.

The Brass Likes Him, Too

The explosion never came. Top military men in Westmoreland's headquarters are now among those who praise most highly the job Komer is doing.

"He has done more to spark up our staff meetings than anyone," says one general. "He's got us thinking."

"The guy doesn't sit on his duff and work a five-day week like most of these civilians," says a colonel. "He generates more ideas than anyone in this headquarters."

"We thought there was going to be trouble—with him supposedly having a direct line to the White House and all that," says another general. "But it's worked out fine."

"People like him better these days," says a top civilian official. "Once you get over his super-adrenalin approach and his more obvious traits, such as name-dropping, you see there's more to the guy than that. He's really bright. He's shaken up the pacification program and got it functioning."

None of this means that Komer has hit the sawdust trail and changed his ways completely.

"He still can't restrain himself occasionally from sticking his oar into the (military) strategic discussions," says one officer. "And he's still too damn optimistic."

Komer's energetic ways have also made him an easy target for the wags around headquarters.

At one point he began what he called Operation Takeoff to get pacification moving. Military men, sensitive to Komer's reputation, called it Operation Take-Over.

Also, in the Army's way of calling everything by initials, the U.S. head-

quarters and Gen. Westmoreland are referred to as COMUSMACV which stands for Commander U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam.

Noting the blizzard of paperwork that comes from Komer's office, however, headquarters wags have taken to calling the place, instead of COMUSMACV, KOMERSMACV.

Komer himself is very much aware of the reputation that preceded him. He almost seems to delight in the fact that he was something of a legend before he got here.

But he also takes satisfaction that he is winning his critics over. He said, for example, that he found not a single one of the resignations threatened upon his arrival had been carried out. "There are still some military guys who grouse" about having a civilian giving them orders, he says, but adds he thinks he has won over all those worth winning.

Westmoreland Is 'Westy'

His relationship with Westmoreland (always "Westy" to name-dropper Komer) is excellent, he says.

He says he still pleads "guilty" to the charge of being an optimist but that he does not think he is excessively wide-eyed.

"Sure, I've got a better appreciation of the problems and the obstacles now than I had 10,000 miles away in Washington," he says.

But, he says, as a longtime professional analyst of situations for the CIA, he believes he knows better than most people how to read the signs here.

Also, he says, with the view he gets from participating in both the embassy and military operations and with his Washington background, he has a fuller, more rounded picture of Vietnam than a lot of other people.

As a result, he says, he thinks unmistakable progress is being made in the war. "We are grinding them (the Viet Cong) down," he says.

He says the optimist—he thinks the progress will be-